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JOHN ROBINSON'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

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"In the next place, for the wholesome counsel Mr. Robinson gave that part of the Church whereof he was Pastor, at their departure from him to begin the great work of Plantation in New England. Amongst other wholesome instructions and exhortations, he used these expressions, or to the same purpose:

We are now, ere long, to part asunder; and the Lord knoweth whether ever he should live to see our faces again. But whether the Lord had appointed it or not; he charged us, before God and his blessed angels, to follow him no further than he followed Christ; and if God should reveal anything to us by any other Instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his Ministry. For he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.

He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who were come to a period in religion; and would go no further than the Instruments of their Reformation. As, for example, the Lutherans: they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw. For whatever part of God's will, he had further imparted and revealed to Calvin; they will rather die than embrace it. 'And so also,' saith he, 'You see the Calvinists. They stick where he left them; a misery much to be lamented.

'For though they were precious shining lights in their Times; yet God had not revealed his whole will to them; and were they now living,' saith he, 'they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light as that they had received.'

Here also he put us in mind of our Church Covenant; at least that part of it whereby we promise and covenant with God and one with another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word; but withal exhorted us to take heed what we received for truth; and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth before we received it. 'For,' saith he, 'It is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick antichristian darkness; and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.'

Another thing he commended to us, was that we should use all means to avoid and shake off the name 'Brownist'; being a mere

nickname and brand to make religion odious, and the Professors of it, to the Christian world. 'And to that end,' said he, 'I should be glad if some godly Minister would go over with you, before my coming. For, said he, there will be no difference between the unconfordable Ministers and you, when they come to the practice of the ordinances out of the Kingdom.' And so advised us, by all means, to endeavor to close with the godly party of the Kingdom of England, and rather to study union than division, viz., How near we might possibly, without sin, close with them; than, in the least measure, to affect division or separation from them."

So run the notable paragraphs in the so-called Farewell Address, delivered by John Robinson to that portion of his Leyden church of Separatists which had elected to become Pilgrims to this new world, the tercentenary of whose landing at Plymouth is soon to be celebrated. It is not clear precisely when or where the Address was delivered, whether as part of the sermon which Robinson preached from Ezra 8 21 when the as yet undivided church held its last meeting in Leyden, or as a fragment of the "Christian discourse" with which the Pilgrims and the friends they were leaving comforted themselves in Delfshaven on the night before the *Speedwell* sailed. But time and place are immaterial, for the words have a timeless and universal character which must endear them and John Robinson who spoke them to lovers of religious freedom and progress everywhere and always. So remarkable are they, all things considered, that one is tempted to suspect their authenticity. Can John Robinson, a Separatist minister, have been so broad-minded and large-hearted as to speak thus in 1620? The doubt was insinuated by Mr. George Sumner in a *Memoir of the Pilgrims in Leyden*, published in 1846 in the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, (ser. 3, vol. IX). Without actually denying authenticity, Mr. Sumner pointed out that the argument from silence, taken in connection with the peculiar appropriateness of the words to the argument of the book in which alone the Address appears, justly

arouses suspicion. Both points are well taken. It is true that neither Bradford nor Morton gives any inkling of the Address, and that the sole authority is Winslow's *Hypocrisy Unmasked* which was published in 1646, twenty-six years afterwards. It is also true that in *Hypocrisy Unmasked*, Winslow was defending the Plymouth settlers against charges of intolerance and bigotry, and naturally it was much to his purpose to show that their revered religious teacher had inculcated principles of catholicity on so solemn and memorable an occasion as that of their departure from Holland. But on the other hand every historian knows that the argument from silence is weak and treacherous. Winslow had been with the Leyden company for three years prior to the departure from Holland, and as one of the *Speedwell* and *Mayflower* pilgrims, had full opportunity to know what was said and done. It should be noted, too, that he does not profess to give the precise words used but reports in indirect discourse "these expressions or to the same purpose." As for the *tendency* argument, here too it must be said that no "tendency document" should be rejected out of hand just because it has a tendency, unless it can be proved that the tendency is untrue to the facts. Was Winslow the sort of man to fabricate an address like this, not out of whole cloth but out of no cloth at all, in order to strengthen his argument? One ought to think not once nor twice before accusing Winslow of dishonesty, for really that is what it comes to, if in order to serve his turn and strengthen his plea, he put into the mouth of Robinson words which he never used. It is rather mean to seek to prove that Robinson was not a liberal by insinuating that Winslow was a liar. Besides, as will be shown presently, the words are in entire accord with the sentiments of Robinson as preserved in writings of unquestioned genuineness.

If then the Address must be deemed substantially authentic, precisely what does it mean? It sounds like a

remarkable affirmation of freedom and progress in religion, but perhaps Robinson did not intend that his words should be taken quite so comprehensively. This has been maintained by certain ecclesiastical descendants of the Pilgrims who have been nettled by the use made of his words to shelter liberalism in theology under the protection of an honored name. In the early part of the nineteenth century there appeared among the descendants of the early settlers hereabouts a party which took to itself the name of Liberal Christian, by the members of which the words of Robinson were freely and triumphantly quoted. More conservative opponents might attack religious freedom and progress in a periodical entitled *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, but the Liberals were proud to believe that theirs was the true spirit of the Pilgrims, John Robinson himself being witness. Naturally, this was exceedingly irritating to the Conservatives, but there was no effective rejoinder until the publication in 1880 of Dr. Dexter's monumental book *Congregationalism as Seen in its Literature* in which it was argued that in the famous Address Robinson was thinking solely of church polity and not at all of theological doctrine. Although this view has found little acceptance, Dr. Dexter was a most competent scholar and his case is stronger than has been commonly supposed. Let me therefore put the argument for the narrower interpretation of the Farewell Address as clearly and forcibly as possible before presenting certain other considerations which warrant at least an arrest of judgment.

First then it must be remembered that the Separatists were separatists just because of questions of church polity and not at all on matters of theological dogma. The Puritans, whose left wing they were, differed from the Church of England partly on doctrine — they were stout Calvinists while the Anglicans inclined rather to Arminianism — partly on the score of ritual, for there was much of Rome still clinging to the vestments and ceremonies of

the Church of England which they would fain reform, but partly also on account of their preference for the presbyterial organization of Geneva over the Episcopacy of England. But they believed in the Church of England and wished to remain within its fold achieving the reforms they demanded by working from within. Among them, however, were some who came to believe that on account of its corruptions in organization and ritual the Church of England, in their elegant phrase, was as very a whore as the Church of Rome and consequently no true bride of Christ. Accordingly they took to heart the apostolic injunction, "Come ye out from among them and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing." In their eyes the Church of England was Sodom, Babylon, a cage of unclean birds, within which they could not stay save at the peril of their souls and the dishonor of Christ. Hence they became Separatists, differing from the Puritans not in doctrine, for both alike were Calvinists, but principally in a theory of the church and a method of reformation in harmony with that theory. Their study of the Scriptures had led them to the conclusion that the true church of Christ was a purer and a simpler thing than either Rome or Canterbury acknowledged. It was at this point then that new light had broken for them out of God's holy Word, for which cause they were Separatists.

Secondly, it was again at this very point that new light had recently come to Robinson himself. He had held that because the Church of England was a false church it was sinful for one who had received the new light to have public communion with it, even to the extent of being present at one of its services, or private communion with any of its members. A member of a Separated church in Amsterdam who attended a service of the Church of England was excommunicated for the offense. At this point, however, new light had come to John Robinson following an interchange of views between himself and Dr. William Ames,

the famous Puritan scholar and clergyman. In Robinson's own words:

"But had my persuasion in it been fuller than ever it was, I profess myself always one of them who still desire to learn further, or better, what the good will of God is. And I beseech the Lord from mine heart, that there may be in the men (towards whom I desire in all things lawful to enlarge myself) the like readiness of mind to forsake every evil way, and faithfully to embrace and walk in the truth they do or may see, as by the mercy of God there is in me: which as I trust it shall be mine, so do I wish it may be their comfort also in the day of the Lord Jesus."

The quotation is from a treatise *Of Religious Communion*, published in 1614, in which he upheld the lawfulness of private communion with individual members of the Church of England but still denied that a Separatist could rightfully participate in the public worship of the Church or listen to the preaching of its ministers. Twenty years later, however, nine years after the death of Robinson, there was published another treatise by him, found in manuscript in his desk, entitled *On the Lawfulness of hearing Ministers in the Church of England*, in which public communion also is defended. It must be remembered also that because of this greater tolerance, Robinson's church was condemned by their fellow-Separatists at Amsterdam, one of whom refers to the Semi-Separatists at Leyden as "ignorant idiots, noddie Nabalites, dogged Doegs, fairfaced Pharisees, shameless Shimeites, malicious Machiavellians." These be hard words, Masters, with their pelting alliterations, and perhaps their author would have been puzzled to explain their peculiar aptness, but one can safely infer that he did not wholly approve of John Robinson and his church. But the point is that at just about the time when the Pilgrims were leaving Leyden, new light was breaking upon Robinson's mind on this particular point which, be it observed, is precisely that touched upon in the Farewell

Address when he urges his Pilgrim friends to close with the godly party of the Church of England, seeking unity rather than division, and even expresses his desire that some godly minister would go over with them. Surely then here is good ground for believing that in the Farewell Address he was thinking not of doctrine but of polity, better ground if I may be so presumptuous as to say so, than Dr. Dexter himself has given.

Finally, it is true, as Dr. Dexter insists, that Robinson was a convinced Calvinist and that nowhere in all his writings is there the faintest suggestion of any wavering in his mind with respect to the truth of that system of doctrine. Remember also the source from which the anticipated new light and truth were to come — His holy Word. Certainly Robinson did not look for new religious truth to human reason, or to any other source than the book of God's perfect and final revelation. One must confess that the so-called Liberals have taken Robinson in a sense which he would have repudiated with indignant horror when they have quoted "*more truth and light*" with orotund voice and whispered or even passed over in silence "*God's holy Word.*"

So stands, then, the argument for the narrower interpretation of the Farewell Address, and evidently the case is a strong one although perhaps not wholly convincing. For there are considerations on the opposite side. Robinson bewailed the state of the followers both of Luther and of Calvin who had come to a stand in religion, being unwilling to advance beyond the instruments of their reformation — "a misery much to be lamented." Is it at all reasonable to suppose that here Robinson was thinking exclusively of the teachings of Luther or Calvin concerning church polity? Again, he reminded the Pilgrims of the Covenant by which they had constituted themselves a church, wherein they made solemn promise to God and to one another to receive whatever light or

truth God should make known to them from his written Word. This is plainly a reference to the Bradford Covenant with its memorable outlook clause — “to walk in all *His* ways, made known or to be made known unto us.” Did *all His ways* denote only ways of church polity? Certainly in the administration of discipline upon those who had thus covenanted together, the Pilgrims did not so restrict it — God’s ways were moral as well as ecclesiastical; in the street and home God walked as well as in the sanctuary, and there too men must walk in his ways. Again, it has been said that the distinction which we make so easily and properly between dogma and polity was foreign to the mind of Robinson, since both were of revelation. There is some truth in the contention; nevertheless Robinson did distinguish between them and with remarkable insight put them in their proper places on a scale of values:

“I will, therefore, conclude this point with a double exhortation: the former, respecting us ourselves, who have, by the mercy of God, with the faith of Christ, received his order and ordinances; which is, that we please not ourselves therein too much, as if in them piety and religion did chiefly consist. . . . Of which evil, and over valuation of these things, howsoever great in themselves, we are in the more danger, considering our persecutions, and sufferings for them; but that, as we believe these things are necessarily to be done, so we consider that other things are not only not to be left undone, but to be done much more. The grace of faith in Christ, and the fear of God, the continual renewing of our repentance, with love, mercy, humility, and modesty, together with fervent prayer, and hearty thanksgiving unto God for his unspeakable goodness, are the things wherein especially we must serve God; nourishing them in our own hearts, and so honoring them in others, wheresoever they appear to dwell.”

I find it hard to believe that a man who could write with such fine moral insight and tender grace of style could have been thinking only of church polity when he was speaking words of solemn farewell to friends who were starting on their pilgrimage. Nevertheless, it may be

true that if some one had asked Robinson, point-blank and on the spot, exactly what he meant, it is not improbable that he would have replied by urging peace between Separatist and Puritan. There is no question in view of quotations already made from his published works and especially in view of the Wallaeus-Hommius document that at just this time he was less stout than he had been for the Separation and was yearning for a broader Christian fellowship. Nor is it at all unlikely that he foresaw that his little company would be the precursors of a much larger and more important Puritan migration and that the relations between the two parties in the New World would be, and indeed must be, more fraternal than was the case in England and Holland. It was probably this thought which filled his mind rather than any hope for new revelations of doctrine. And yet, while admitting so much, one must add that to draw from this an inference adverse to Robinson's catholicity of mind, such catholicity as the usual interpretation of the Farewell Address has ascribed to him, would be thoroughly unjust. For although a principle may be consciously recognized at only a single point of application determined by immediate and pressing interests, it may nevertheless be a genuine principle exhibiting a general mental attitude and therefore sure to find other and perhaps more significant applications should occasion arise. And this, I take it, was precisely the case with John Robinson. As one reads his published words in chronological order, he becomes aware of a gradual loss of youthful acridity and a progressive mellowing of tone. He became more open-minded, and when a man's mind is actually open, so it be not merely at the bottom, there is no telling what may find entrance. Nor need the mind be open at all points i' the shipman's card; a man may be perfectly hospitable yet all his various guests may enter by a single door. That Robinson was actually growing into catholicity of spirit

with advancing years of experience and religious thoughtfulness is apparent from the honor paid him by men of various parties. Baillie, whose *Dissuasives* (1645) is bitterly against Separatists, says of Robinson that he was the most learned, polished, and modest spirit that sect ever enjoyed. Bradford both in the *History* and in the *First Dialogue* bears similar testimony. But one need not go beyond Robinson's own writings to be assured of his sweetness and largeness of temper. Take for example the concluding paragraph of *A Just and Necessary Apology* published in Latin in 1619, and in English, translated by himself, in 1625.

"And here thou hast, Christian reader, the whole order of our conversation in the work of Christian religion, set down both as briefly and plainly as I could. If in any thing we err, advertise us brotherly, with desire of our information, and not, as our countrymen's manner for the most part is, with a mind of reproaching us, or gratifying of others; and whom thou findest in error, thou shalt not leave in obstinacy, nor as having a mind prone to schism. Err we may, alas! too easily; but heretics, by the grace of God, we will not be. But and if the things which we do seem right in thine eyes, as to us certainly they do, I do earnestly, and by the Lord Jesus admonish and exhort thy godly mind, that thou wilt neither withhold thy due obedience from his truth, nor just succour from thy distressed brethren. Neither do thou endure that either the smallness of the number, or meanness of the condition of those that profess it, should prejudice with thee the profession of the truth. . . . But now if it so come to pass, which God forbid! that the most being either forestalled by prejudice, or by prosperity made secure, there be few found, especially men of learning, who will so far vouchsafe to stoop as to look upon so despised creatures and their cause; this alone remaineth, that we turn our faces and mouths unto thee, O most powerful Lord and gracious Father, humbly imploring help from God towards those who are by men left desolate. There is with thee no respect of persons, neither are men less regards of thee, if regards of thee, for the world's disregarding them. They who truly fear thee and work righteousness, although constrained to live by leave in a foreign land, exiled from country, spoiled of goods, destitute of friends, few in number, and mean in condition, are for all that, unto thee (O gracious God)

nothing the less acceptable. Thou numberest all their wanderings, and putttest their tears into thy bottles. Are they not written in thy book? Towards thee, O Lord, are our eyes; confirm our hearts and bend thine ear, and suffer not our feet to slip, or our face to be ashamed, O thou both just and merciful God. To him through Christ be praise for ever in the church of saints; and to thee, loving and Christian reader, grace, peace, and eternal happiness. Amen."

I must say that I know of no bit of English prose in the controversial literature of the period which begins to compare with that in tender and appealing grace. It fairly melts in a reader's mouth and is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Be the precise interpretation of the Farewell Address what it may, John Robinson himself, in inmost spirit and temper was all that the very broadest interpretation of it has led us to think, and it meant much to our Pilgrim forefathers that they had a religious teacher of such a sort as this. It meant much to them and much also to the future of Plymouth, Massachusetts, New England, and the United States that was to be. For what has been said may seem to be merely of antiquarian or what is sometimes slurringly called academic interest, but in reality it bears upon important issues. The Pilgrims came to Plymouth and for the first few years the future of the little colony hung in the balance. Without were an inhospitable climate and unfruitful soil, disease, famine, and menacing savages, and if within there had been bickerings and dissensions, the little company must inevitably have crumbled. And there was reason to expect internal wranglings, for these people were Separatists, who as a class were a painfully cantankerous lot. By good chance there has been preserved for us an account of the petty quarrels in the church of Separatists in Amsterdam of which Francis Johnson was pastor. He had married, while the church was still in London, the widow of a well-to-do haberdasher, and his brother George Johnson remonstrated with his brother for her extravagance in

dress, wearing three, four, and five golden rings at once, a showish hat, great starched ruffs, an excessive deal of lace and a cod-piece fashion in the breast, and using musk perfumery, while her husband and the church were in prison at home and poverty abroad. The pastor made a spirited rejoinder, and George followed it with an even more offensive letter, in which he said he feared he might quote against her Jer. 3 3 (last clause) which reads, "Thou hast a whore's forehead; thou refusest to be ashamed." This led Francis to threaten excommunication, but George yielded and a truce was patched up which lasted for over a year. In Amsterdam George was told that he would be elected elder if he would confess sin in alleging Jer. 3 3 (last clause) against Mrs. J., but he replied that after mature reflection on sea and land he had come to the conclusion that it was not sinful to allege that Scripture against her. Whereupon there were renewed threats of excommunication. Several church meetings followed, the general tone of which is well indicated by the following quotation from Dexter (*Congregationalism as Seen in its Literature*, p. 287):

"George Johnson was then accused of having charged Mrs. Johnson with musk as sin; and he replied that it was the excess and not the use which he condemned. Then they said he charged her with sin in wearing a topish hat. After much debate the church voted that the hat was not topish in nature. G. J. urged that he spake against the hat in her being a pastor's wife, and he in bonds, and not that the hat was simply unlawful in the nature thereof. Whereat the pastor made a syllogism, thus: What is not in the nature thereof topish, that used by any is not topish: the hat in the nature thereof is not topish: *ergo* being used by her it is not topish. G. J. wanted that reduced to writing, whereat the Pastor changed it two or three ways, and G. J. replied that though velvet in its nature were not topish, yet if common mariners should wear such, it would be a token of pride and topishness in them. Also a gilded rapier and a feather are not topish in their nature, neither in a captain to wear them; and yet if a minister should wear them, they would be signs of great vanity, topishness, and lightness in him. The pastor pleaded that differences of circumstances

and means made dress lawful in one which was not in another, that his wife paid for her own clothes, and that such things might lawfully be worn; whereupon one of the members begged him not so to speak lest it should bring in many inconveniences among their wives. Finally the brethren demanded that the gown with the cod-piece breast should be produced that they might decide for themselves upon its indecency; but the Pastor refused. So the matter worried along until both G. J. and the old father who had come over from England to make peace had been excommunicated — Francis Johnson himself pronouncing the sentence against his own father and brother.”

That is a most instructive glimpse into the inner life of a Separatist church, and when in addition we recall the many distressing schisms which rent the same church over matters of the smallest moment, we wonder what would have been the fate of this little bickering company on the lonely and inhospitable coast of New England. In very truth had the Pilgrims been Separatists of this sort the Plymouth colony could not have survived the first winter; but happily the example and oft-repeated teaching of their Leyden pastor had put another spirit in them, as is evident from the report which Bradford gives of the sweet harmony of their united life in Holland, to which also the magistrates of Leyden gave witness; and hence it was that on these shores the much-distressed company held together in mutual love and confidence.

Furthermore, eight years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth the first spume-flakes of the great wave of Puritan immigration fell at Salem. Now in England, Puritan and Separatist were at loggerheads and vile epithets were bandied back and forth in the name of the Lord, as if the very devil were in them both. We remember the words of Higginson as the shores of old England faded from his view: “We will not say, as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving of England, Farewell, Babylon, Farewell, Rome; but we will say Farewell, dear England, Farewell, the Church of God in England, and all the Christian friends there. We do not go to New England as

Separatists from the Church of England, though we cannot but separate from the corruptions in it; but we go to practise the positive part of church reformation and propagate the Gospel in America." Such an attitude, with the feeling towards the Separatist which it reveals, promises ill for friendly relations between Plymouth and Salem. Yet shortly after landing at Salem that very company of Puritans organized themselves into a church by covenant quite after the Plymouth pattern, and Higginson himself was ordained minister of the church by the church as if he were not already a regularly ordained minister in the Church of England. Moreover, the Plymouth church gave and the Salem church received the right hand of fellowship, and from that time forward the two colonies stood together with consequences of immeasurable importance for the future. What if they had played Kilkenny cats? Would they not have been devoured one of another, even if their savage foes had not annihilated them severally? What then is the explanation of this unlooked-for fellowship? Of course the ocean had actually and literally turned the Puritans into Separatists whether they would or no. The leagues of tossing sea traversed through many weary weeks effected a decisive physical separation. Besides, why talk longer of reforming from within when here there was no without to be reformed. Their occupation as a reforming party within the church was gone, for here they were "the whole thing." What more natural then, since a fresh start had to be made, than to start right, and form out of hand a true Church of Christ after the New Testament model. Robinson had predicted that exactly this would be the course of events, and so it turned out. But deeper than any one of these reasons separately and more significant, I fancy, than all of them together is the fact that the men of Plymouth were of the church of John Robinson. The Amsterdam church of Francis Johnson would have been

in perpetual quarrels among themselves and with the Puritans in Salem. But the advanced Puritans of the Bay and the Semi-Separatists at Plymouth were able to live and work together.

Was it then solely because of John Robinson that this happy result was accomplished? But he never crossed the Atlantic. Was it because he had taught the Pilgrims? But who taught him and who transported his spirit? If I may trot out a little hobby of my own, permit me to say that perhaps the good Leyden pastor learned some of his liberality from certain lay members of his congregation, namely from William Bradford and William Brewster, particularly the latter. Brewster was a man of the world as almost no other of the contemporary Separatists was. He had spent three years in diplomatic service with William Davison, one of which, 1585, was passed in the Netherlands, and both there and also during thirteen years as Master of the Post and caretaker of the Manor at Scrooby, he had learned the ways of men. Moreover, it is expressly stated that he had been in the habit of attending the public services of other than Separatist churches and that Robinson had winked at this before his eyes were permanently open to the legitimacy of the practice. Again, Winslow expressly testified that "if any joining with us . . . held forth separation from the Church of England," Robinson or Brewster would stop them forthwith, showing that we "required no such things at their hands but only to hold faith in Christ Jesus, holiness in the fear of God, and submission to every ordinance and appointment of God, leaving the Church of England to themselves and to the Lord." Both Robinson and Brewster signed the Seven Articles, in the second of which the Leyden Company profess their desire to keep spiritual communion in peace with the Church of England. Hence I strongly suspect that the character of the Plymouth Pilgrims was due quite as much in the last analysis to William Brewster as

to John Robinson. If so, the history of this country was mightily influenced at a critical period by Christian laymen. Certainly it was Samuel Fuller, doctor and deacon of Plymouth, who was the active agent in bringing his colony into friendly relations with Salem and Boston — thus foreshadowing the value of medical missions in the diffusion of Christianity, and perhaps also the means by which eventually Christian unity will be achieved through the leadership of laymen. This would not be the only instance in Christian history in which laymen have taught their professional clerical instructors the ways of a larger, more generous, Christian charity. Indeed, as one distinguished theologian has said with emphasis — Christianity is preëminently a layman's religion, and it is this just because Jesus himself was a layman.